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Interview with Dr. Margaret Flowers, Arrested Tuesday at Senate Roundtable on Health Care

By Joan Brunwasser

I have with me Dr. Margaret Flowers, co-chair of the Maryland branch of the 16,000-member [Physicians for a National Health Program](#). She is a pediatrician, and mother of three teenagers, who left the practice of medicine about two years ago to work on health care reform full time. She spends a lot of time speaking to legislators, both local and congressional, and to the public about health care reform. Dr. Flowers explains, "I got involved because I saw how private insurers were making medical decisions that were inappropriate and because I felt like I (and others) couldn't practice quality medicine because of the tricks that insurers use to avoid paying for health care. It is wrong and people are suffering and dying because of it."

Welcome, Dr. Flowers. You must be exhausted after your 'adventures' on Capitol Hill Tuesday. Tell us how you and your colleagues came to be rounded up by the police.

It started last week. We, meaning some of the people who advocate for a national health system based on single payer financing, learned who the Senate Finance Committee had invited to the Roundtable on the Expansion of Health Insurance Coverage and it wasn't very reassuring. Those invited represented either a conservative viewpoint or the interests of the private insurance industry and big business. None of them represented single payer – the most efficient way to expand coverage by expanding Medicare to everyone.

Several of the national groups organized call-ins to members of the committee by constituents in their states. Other groups organized having faxes sent. Despite thousands of phone calls and faxes, we learned on Monday that Sen. Baucus's office had said that there would be no more invitations to speakers for the event.

The Roundtable was planned as a public event, but the public was not allowed to speak or to ask questions. In addition, it

was the type of event that you must get to early and stand in line for hours just to get in. It sounded like it was going to be one more in the series of very scripted and controlled events that has characterized this "health care debate."

We decided that we would try to attend and request that one of us, all knowledgeable about single payer, be allowed to have a seat at the table. We arrived around 7 am and waited in line. We were allowed into the Committee Room at around 9:45. We took seats in the audience.

As I sat there looking around the room, what I saw saddened me. We had decided to wear black to symbolize the death and suffering of thousands of Americans every year who can't get needed health care. As I looked around and saw the Senators and staffers and guests of the Roundtable, I saw people who were well-off and who were smiling and laughing. Their demeanor did not match what I felt was supposed to be a serious discussion of our nation's health crisis and how to address it.

Shortly before the meeting started, one of the people in our group, Russell Mokhiber, stood up and said something to the effect that there were no people representing single payer at the table and that there were doctors in the room who were willing to take a seat. He was arrested.

Following that, we rose, one by one, and spoke out for single payer. Each of the eight of us were arrested. We were handcuffed and held for around seven hours. We were charged with Unlawful Conduct and Disruption of Congress.

What did you all hope to accomplish by being arrested?

Our first goal was to have a seat at the table. That has been a request to Congress throughout this year, really since the presidential election. All we've asked is that when the government looks at options for health care reform that single payer is given equal attention. We would like the Congressional Budget Office to review the cost of improving and expanding Medicare to everyone. We know that this is an affordable way to provide health care to everyone.

If we couldn't get a seat, at least we could expose the insincerity of the current attempt at health care reform and show that single payer was actively being excluded.

I risked arrest because I hear what my colleagues are going through. I hear their frustration at trying to deliver high quality health care but running into obstacles placed by the insurers. I hear frustration when the physician knows what the correct treatment is but can't get the treatment authorized because an insurance administrator who has no

medical background is telling the doctor what he or she can and cannot do. I hear the frustration caused by the huge amount of money and time that is spent by physician practices trying to get reimbursed by health insurers for health care that has been delivered. I hear physicians saying that they wish they could spend more time with their patients, but they are squeezed because they have to see a certain number of patients in order to keep their practices going and pay their staff. I see my primary care colleagues working without pay and many of them leaving private practice. And I meet patients who can't get the health care they need, even if they are insured. I see health insurance policies that deny care that could improve the quality of life of a patient with chronic illness and actually save money in the long run by keeping them healthier or allowing them to return to work.

And I know that we could solve these problems by creating a national health system that is based on health care as a human right. The public wants a national health system and providers want a national health system, but the Senate won't listen and actively excludes our voices.

Stay tuned for part two of our interview, in which Dr. Flowers spells out what is necessary to get our government to consider single payer as an option for national health care.

Check out www.pnhp.org, www.healthcare-now.org, www.singlepayeraction.org and www.1payer.net.

Listen to [Rob Kall's May 6th radio interview](#) with Dr. Flowers.

Read Ralph Nader: [Disruption of Congress?](#)

Author's Bio: Joan Brunwasser is a co-founder of [Citizens for Election Reform \(CER\)](#) which exists for the sole purpose of raising the public awareness of the critical need for election reform. We aim to restore fair, accurate, transparent, secure elections where votes are cast in private and counted in public. Electronic (computerized) voting systems are simply antithetical to democratic principles.

CER set up a lending library to achieve the widespread distribution of the DVD Invisible Ballots: A temptation for electronic vote fraud. Within eighteen months, the project had distributed over 3200 copies across the country and beyond. CER now concentrates on group showings, OpEd

pieces, articles, reviews, interviews, discussion sessions, networking, conferences, anything that promotes awareness of this critical problem. Joan has been Election Integrity Editor for OpEdNews since December, 2005.

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